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THE INDIVIDUALISM OF MARCUS AURELIUS.

When Marcus Aurelius set down in his "Meditations" the results of those endeavors after self-discipline which were essential to his ideas of duty, he not only furnished the world with an example of the loftiest moral insight, but he gave expression to a temperament and type of mind which will always influence life. He is by no means "the last of his line"; he will never be without spiritual descendants. In the pages of Dr. Rendall, we have recently had placed before us a masterly portrayal of the man. Yet it would be giving a poor return for the benefit received if on that account we were to cease to study Marcus' actual work.

Let us glance for a moment at his teaching as a whole. Be resigned, he at all times insists. Self-submission to the continuous act of participation and surrender which the Stoic *cosmos* manifests, leads to the acceptance of whatever is in season for the universe. An individual man is part, but practically an insignificant part, of the whole. All is well with the cosmos, but we can only reach that view by the contemplation of the insignificance of particulars. It appears, however, as if the thought which underlies this doctrine must ultimately defeat its own end; for we are left finally with a limited individual which expresses, or at least participates in, the fullness of the whole, and, notwithstanding is ordered to acquiesce, literally without a murmur, in an incompleteness which is inscrutable. What wonder if the individual revolts? Curiously enough, we find the direct antithesis of this view in the hedonism of Omar Khayyám. Take the famous stanza—

"Ah Love! could you and I with Him conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire
Would we not shatter it to bits—and then
Remould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!"

In a former edition of the *Rubáiyát* the word "Him" is rendered "Fate" by Fitz Gerald, which appears to be an improvement. But in any case, the verse presents us with a striking

contrast to the Stoic view of the universe. It reverses the picture, and shows how faith in the music of the spheres may be opposed by faith in the unfathomable injustice of things. For Marcus there is really no such conflict between the cosmic and the ethical process as Professor Huxley conceived, and therefore it does not need to be explained; for Omar (or Fitz Gerald masquerading as Omar) the cosmic process is so profoundly unethical, that the ethical process which arises within it is hardly worthy of the name.

Marcus, then, as so many great moralists have done, abides by the harmony. And the result is, that if we pessimistically subject ourselves to an over-ruling optimism, we reach one of his main points of view; we grasp his individualism in essentials. The problem thus indicated, indeed—the reconciling of the part with the whole—has probably not been satisfactorily solved yet. But there seems to be little question that the more isolated the individual is made—in accordance with Marcus' tendency—the more difficult is the philosophical task. If man harmonizes with his fellow-man merely by *fitting in* to him in a marvelous way, and not by being identical with him in spite of differences, the strain of unifying which is put upon the cosmos bids fair to break it. To assume that these parallel lines meet at infinity is very questionable metaphysics. The unifying power itself remains a mystery. But let us see how Marcus' compromise is worked out by him in some of the details of ethics.

The isolation of the inner man is the first point that strikes us. The inner man is self-swayed, makes itself just what it wills to be, makes all that happens seem to itself what it wills. Withdraw into yourself, says Marcus; for by nature our reasoning inner self finds content in just dealing and the calm which follows. As to pain, if it is past bearing, it brings an end; if not, it can be endured. And in doing all this we are discharging, of course, a cosmic function: "life in smooth flow" is the discharge of that function; to recognize that fact is reason. Such an attitude, when not only ourselves but others come to be considered, makes us regard justice, and indeed all virtue, as primarily cosmic—a duty to God or to the universe.

Secondarily, however, virtue branches out into a social principle; and accordingly, we arrive in due time at the famous "World-city" of which all men are citizens. Virtue branches out in this secondary way, because man is the apex of nature. Man is by nature social, and he cannot get behind his nature. He has even, in addition, a lower sort of communion with the inferior parts of the world.

The practical result of this doctrine is that Marcus retreats into himself triumphantly at times when we should consider that he ought to be out of doors. It is well, therefore, to look for a statement in the "Meditations" which will show Marcus' attitude at its best, and yet indicate where his tendency breaks away from the modern world. For that will enable us to see where, in ethics, his compromise between the cosmic and the social differs from the compromise or reconciliation between the two which modern religious thought presents. And we find such a statement in the well-known passage: "The residue of life is short. Live as on a mountain. It matters not whether here or there; everywhere you are a citizen of the city of the world. Let men see and witness a true man, a life conformed to nature. If they cannot bear him, let them make away with him. Better that than life on their terms" (X. 15). The extract is striking for its nobility of spirit; not less so for the absence of eagerness to improve mankind positively. The tone is the true tone of kindness; but not of "Compel them to come in." Marcus' harmonizing of the cosmic with the moral is subject to his usual restraint; "nothing too much," he seems to say. It has not such rich and full tones as that of Christendom. This fact seems to be an essential feature of the case.

In the struggle to show forth the characteristics of a true man, Marcus relied mainly on reason; and relied on it in a way that has so often been discussed *apropos* of Stoicism that we need not spend much time on it. Reason, the judgment-forming power, could, in his view, over-ride passion and sensibility generally. Yet strongly as he held that the good man must have severely disciplined passion and desire by reason, condemnation, in set terms, of the grosser forms of vice is singularly absent from his writings. He takes all that for granted. He

is mainly concerned with the refinements of a rationalistic morality. And he only combats the doctrine of "pleasure" indirectly, as it has no vital interest for him. Death and life, good report and evil report, pain and pleasure, riches and poverty, he says, can neither enoble nor demean. This doctrine, no doubt, simplifies the problem for him unwarrantably, as it enables him to fall back on his idea of "indifferent things" in order to escape practical difficulties; but on the other hand some of his finest utterances are in enunciation of the partial truth contained in his error—the fact that virtue rises above the mere vicissitudes of fortune.

His view of life naturally affects his view of death. On the question of suicide, he is, of course, according to modern notions, unsound; though there are passages in his work which would themselves afford a good answer to those opinions of his which have been condemned. The passage at the end of the "Meditations," however—his *nunc dimittis*—shows the essential part of his sombre outlook. There he compares the end of life to the discharge given by the praetor to a player whose task is done. No tyrant gives us our dismissal, but nature. The completeness of the work is not in our hands. "Death" it has been said in modern times, "is an incident that doesn't count." Thus Marcus' apathy has a note in it which is characteristic of all disciplined minds. Life, no doubt, must not be made a meditation upon death; but death is a fact not to be gainsaid. The man who imagines that life is given him for the working out of purposes, for a connected and rational series of endeavors, and fails to consider how death, with its immediate possibility and its ultimate certainty, continuously affects these, has still something to learn from Marcus' "harping" on his latter end.

According to the traditional view, Marcus represents the approximation of the heathen to the Christian Schools; and his "piety" was almost a prophecy of the future. The "way of perfection," which, he proclaimed, was to live out each day as one's last, with no fever, no torpor and no acting a part, was a way which many were to tread after him—ascetic and individualistic like himself. And if he sometimes showed a pes-

simism which was not exactly imitated afterwards, his ideas of life as over-shadowed by death and yet triumphing over it have a curious significance for us. There is little doubt that he did not believe in the immortality of the soul in any sense that would satisfy Christianity. On the other hand he is absolutely free from "other-worldliness." He is not sordid in a spiritual way as some have been. Much discussion—some of it very unprofitable—has been spent on the endeavor to determine how far Marcus is entitled to the praises usually conferred on the "Saint" of Christendom; but surely, if we remember that his ideas of brotherly love were only a shade less intense than those of Christendom, and that, on the other hand, the future life was absolutely dark to him, we have sufficiently determined his general position.

Isolated as he conceived the moral self to be, Marcus builds his spiritual edifice confidently on men's moral convictions. "There is nothing absolutely good," he seems to say, "except the good will; and you know it. Be logical then in your conduct; act out your convictions." There is, however, a characteristically individualistic note in his utterances on the subject. If you can find anything better than virtue, he tells you, then seize hold of it by all means, and enjoy the result of your discovery. Yet he is not afraid of your making such a discovery. This confidence in the moral appeal reproduces itself in another light in our own day. We often hear it said that, for all practical purposes, the ethical view of the world is the widest and deepest we have. An ethical view is not necessarily opposed to an intellectual, but as a matter of fact it is more successful in reducing the world to unity or harmony than any intellectual view that we can find at present. It is supreme, therefore, for the time being. The teaching of Marcus might have tended towards such a doctrine, had it not been held back by Stoic dogma. The frame-work of his mental world, however, was an unquestioned Stoicism; and in the modern appeal, the individualistic note is less strongly accentuated.

It has sometimes been suggested that Marcus' outlook on life has in it, not merely an element of individualistic "detachment," but also an element of affectation, even of self-conceit.

In a character less gifted by nature than his, it is said, his principles would result in "priggishness"; it is only the refinement of his disposition that prevents the baser element from showing itself more completely. Now it is, of course, a fact that the Stoic may be unduly self-important. But we must be careful to attribute the effect to the right cause. Conceit is clearly a besetting sin of humanity; and the misuse of any principle, or set of principles, of moral action is likely to lead to it. In Marcus' case, though it is very difficult to argue about such a point, the impression left as a whole seems to be anything but that of arrogance or pride. He can hardly be accused of vanity—a thing indeed which his soul loathed. Sincerity is conspicuous in his utterances; "no acting a part." And probably the reason why he seems to many readers to be so "Christian" a "heathen" is that the virtue of humility in the Christian sense was part of the fibre of his moral being.

One point there is, however, which may be considered more apposite. Marcus, like all moralists who lay great stress on the inner life, values character beyond all else. For him, as we have said, the good will is fundamental. Now when character is thus made prominent, and a man's attention is directed to what he *is*, there may arise the appearance of spiritual pride. But it is difficult to see how we can have morality at all on any other basis than that of character. If we are not to be allowed to differentiate sharply between ourselves "good" and ourselves "bad," we may as well give up the game. No doubt one who is continually occupied with his own character—who is continually fingering his own motives—generally becomes spiritually morbid. But the result flows, not from the conviction that he, personally, must be good, but from an introspection which is prosecuted at wrong times and in wrong circumstances. To have a reasonable conviction of the worth of character, not merely in others, but in ourselves, is essential, and it is not Pharisaic. It may be that Marcus' self-questioning is too continuous; but it must be remembered that the impression produced by his book is that of the cumulative effect of many musings. It was not intended that you should read the work all at once—if indeed it was intended that you should

read it at all. Marcus wrote for himself. And if it is asked why the other side of life is not more adequately represented in his meditations, probably the best answer that can be given is that he wrote in the manner in which he could best remind himself of the principles he valued. If you do not like his methods, pass on; but you cannot generally condemn them.

There is another characteristic of the book which has a tendency to make it seem slightly pedantic, if not affected. Marcus' individualism, as we have pointed out, was philosophical, though not merely philosophical. And it strikes us perhaps that Marcus clung with undue tenacity to his Stoic dogma, because that dogma is no longer our dogma; and we are familiar with the names of great men who have arrived at practical ideas very much the same as those of Marcus, with a different kind of dogma supporting them. Marcus did not realize how in the future Stoicism itself would be separated into a kernel and a husk. His disciples indeed have always returned, as he told them to return, to philosophy, as the sore-eyed to the sponge and egg—but not always to *his* philosophy.

The great practical defect, then, of the ethics of the "Meditations" seems to be that there is no sufficient appreciation of the fact that it is not through the retiral but through the advance of the soul that personality develops, and its dignity is increased. To him that hath shall be given; and the personality which minimizes or despises its human relationships defeats its own end. The very essence of the individuality which Marcus desires consists, we might say, in its inability to exist for itself; and it is just this inability which constitutes its spiritual wealth, its great possession. It cannot become cosmic simply by abstraction. Nevertheless, by a back-stroke as it were, peace and tranquility of the inner self—so ardently desired by man—can be gained; and in representing the latter aspect of the human soul Marcus' work has great value. For he was driven forward, as it were in spite of himself, into the great world-city where men were not merely made to fit into one another for working purposes, like "the upper and lower rows of the teeth," but in some measure lived and died and had their spiritual being in common. Marcus could appreciate

this in some degree, and, at the same time keep his eyes fixed steadily and calmly on eternal righteousness. He was a Stoic to whom life's fitful fever was not altogether as nothing, and therefore he has the power of imparting to those who are oppressed by that fever something of his own Stoic calm. He was not so strong as never to be weak.

Further, he raises in the minds of all who are interested in the problems of Theism, in a characteristic and telling way, the question of how far such patience and such faith in righteousness as he possessed are independent of a theistic basis, and whether his spiritual insight was in accordance with, or went beyond, his philosophy. In particular his individualism raises the question of the ultimate value of the human soul. Is his pessimism, pessimism? Is his calm really calm. The very nobility of his spirit, as I have already indicated, forces us to ask if his outlook was complete; because here we have Stoicism in the form in which it is most attractive to us. Not by his own arguments, but by his influence, one way or other, on our arguments, he primarily draws us to him. He has given us the means of understanding his inmost thoughts, and we are almost bound in honor to make the best spiritual use of them we can.

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